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THE ART OF DYING AS THE ART OF LIVING:  
EXPLORING BUDDHIST DEATH MEDITATION AS A PATH TO HUMAN FLOURISHING

Kayla Stock

*“The practice of learning how to die while living  
constitutes one of the essential skills in the art of living.”<sup>1</sup>*

I first confronted the permanence of death as a junior in high school. In November of 2007, my paternal grandfather was diagnosed with liver cancer and given a prognosis of a few months. This broke me. I was shattered by the thought of losing my grandpa. I had never experienced the death of someone close to me prior to this; I had never been asked to look death in the face.

This happened at a time in my life when I was trying to figure out the profession I would pursue upon graduation. Previous to this, I was fairly confident that nursing would be a good fit, a profession in which I could give of myself to those with whom I was working. Struggling with the experience of my grandfather progressing further into his terminal illness, I questioned my fitness for nursing. How could I function in nursing when the illness and eventual death of my grandpa shook me so thoroughly, when it brought me to my knees?

After this experience, I realized how significant my fear of death had become. Death is the only truly permanent event we experience in our lives. We can never get back those whom we have lost. I hated being victim to this fear. Thus, as I attempted to overcome this fear by learning and confronting the source, I have

found a depth of passion for the topics of death and dying, the alleviation of suffering, and the coping mechanisms for living with grief.

Inspired by these topics and their interaction with spirituality, the main motivation of this paper is to ask how spirituality can inform our ideas about death, ideally by removing the seemingly natural phobic response to our own human finitude. Thus, I will examine the Buddhist practice of death meditation, assess the practice both theologically and scientifically, and then discuss the merits of this practice toward the purposes of human flourishing. I will end with an exploration of the potential ministerial applications of Buddhist death meditation.

## I. THE THEOLOGY OF BUDDHIST DEATH MEDITATION

Meaningful existence and liberation result from confronting death in life, from seeing death as an integral part of *samsāric* existence. Comprehending death, one comprehends life.<sup>2</sup>

The one event every single human will experience in their own life is their own death. Naturally then, some universality exists in the ways that different faith traditions discuss and interact with the notion of death and dying. For instance, Todd Perreira writes:

From the polytheistic pagans of antiquity to the monotheistic Muslims and Trinitarian Christians of the medieval and modern era we frequently encounter expressions that speak of death not as something you experience once at the end of life but as something you learn to experience again and again throughout your life.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that this is a topic of relevance to each person, each life, each community, each culture. However, I believe that Buddhism takes the most honest look at death. Buddhism considers death not as a perfecting process, not needing

to believe in the salvific action of death. Unlike other traditions, one does not skip death's ugly earthiness to instead focus on eschatological visions of eternal bliss; Buddhism does not shy away from desecration and decay. The realities of the process of death are not aesthetically pleasing, and it is Buddhism that is willing to engage with death on this level.

There are a few important tenets of Buddhism that greatly inform the practice of death meditation. The first is the universality of suffering. Foundational to Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path, both of which are targeted at recognizing suffering with the attempt of overcoming the cycles of suffering through the process of enlightenment. Drs. Eva Masel, Sophie Schur, and Herbert Watzke write, "In contrast to other major world religions, Buddhism does not concentrate on the question of the origin of the world or the sense of existence. The origin of Buddhist teachings is the question of why all beings have to experience suffering."<sup>4</sup> A second important Buddhist understanding is the notion of no-self. Similar to suffering, selfhood is something to be transcended since selfhood results in greed and selfishness. Derived from the concept of no-self is the importance of accepting change and impermanences. Masel et al. write, "transitoriness and change are basic features of Buddhist teachings...The body is perceived to be a teacher of impermanence."<sup>5</sup> Both the Buddhist understandings of the ubiquity of suffering and the impermanence of selfhood have important implications for the practice of death meditation.

## II. THE PRACTICE OF DEATH MEDITATION: *MARANASATI*

There are multiple types of Buddhist death meditation practices, but the focus for this paper will be on *maranasati* or mindfulness of death.<sup>6</sup> George Bond describes the *maranasati* practice in its simplest form as being meditation on the thought

“‘death will occur, the life faculty will be interrupted’ (*Vism.* 230). Or he may meditate solely on the idea ‘death, death’”<sup>7</sup> There are also other more involved ways of practicing this type of death meditation. Bond writes:

To enable the meditator to surmount the difficulty of coming to terms with the reality of death in his own life, the *Visuddhimagga* sets out eight specific ways of meditating on death. These eight ways represent eight reflections on various aspects of death which collectively constitute a powerful method guiding the meditator through progressive stages of confronting and comprehending the reality of death.<sup>8</sup>

The stages are as follows:

1. Death as having the appearance of an executioner.
2. Death as the ruin of all success.
3. Death as the inevitable end for all persons—just as it strikes down the great and mighty, so it will strike us down also.
4. Death as the result of ‘sharing the body with many’—a reflection on the infinite number of factors, both internal and external, that cause death.
5. Death as lying near at hand, kept away only by this frail process of life.
6. Death as ‘signless’—nothing about it can be predicted or known in advance.
7. Death as the certain end of a life span that is short at best.
8. Death as a constant phenomenon, occurring at every moment for the aggregate of our existence.<sup>9</sup>

Through the process of the *maranasati* meditations, the unpolished, unsanctified reality of death can be realized and accepted. Death is merely one aspect of life, a chapter written in every life story. These explorations into the process of death, “makes clear the way out of the predicament, for mindfulness of death leads to seeing the true nature of reality...

the meditator begins to comprehend the ‘three marks’ of existence: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and no-self (*anatta*).”<sup>10</sup> The fragility of life that ends in inevitable, inescapable death is made known in this practice.

### III. THE SCIENCE OF BUDDHIST DEATH MEDITATION

Whatever meanings we attach to death may have important implications for our well-being. Thus, at a personal level, death attitudes matter: Death defines personal meaning and determines how we live.<sup>11</sup>

I found a great bounty of research as I began looking at the scientific studies and understandings that could potentially undergird the practice of death meditation. I chose to focus on the topics of death fear/death denial and the converse death acceptance.<sup>12</sup>

#### DEATH DENIAL AND DEATH FEAR

In order to demonstrate the effect of death meditation practices, it is important to establish a starting point. Philip Cozzolino, Laura Blackie, and Lawrence Meyers developed a study to assess the consequences related to death denial and death fear. In establishing the potential origin of death fear, Cozzolino et al. referenced terror management theory (TMT), stating:

TMT begins with the inherent conflict between our biological predisposition for survival, and our highly developed cognitive capabilities that render us uniquely aware of our inevitable demise. As a result of the existential crisis generated by this conflict, the theory states that humans seek to deny their personal vulnerability to death by embracing that which cannot die.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, Cozzolino et al. state humans embrace cultural

worldviews that promote literal or symbolic immortality in order to cope with this tension.<sup>14</sup>

In the study, the 185 participants completed the following scales and surveys: the Death Aptitude Profile-Revised, the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, the Self-Concept Clarity Scale, the Internal Control Index, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the California Psychological Inventory, and the Existential Well-Being subscale of the Spiritual Well-Being Scale.<sup>15</sup> Cozzolino et al. found a stronger sense of self among those with lower death fear and death denial “at least as assessed via measures of self-esteem, self-concept clarity, locus of control, self-realization, and existential well-being.”<sup>16</sup> Further, Cozzolino et al. compares their research to that supportive of the natural benefit of TMT, writing:

Research supporting TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986) has shown that motivated efforts to avoid thoughts of death, and the resulting fear that those thoughts would generate, often predict an enhanced sense of the so-called ‘symbolic-self.’ That is, a defensive self largely defined by—and embedded in—social systems and extrinsic expectations. Our data suggest that reduced levels of death avoidance and death fear predict a stronger, healthier *actual-self* that is personally valued, clearly conceived, efficacious, and that has intrinsic meaning and purpose.<sup>17</sup>

## DEATH ACCEPTANCE

Psychologists Paul Wong and Adrian Tomer, who work on the positive psychological study of death acceptance, would find much accord in the work of Cozzolino et al. on death fear and anxiety. In their writings, Wong and Tomer appreciate the existence of TMT, stating that “all through history, human beings have pondered the meaning of mortality and developed elaborate defense mechanisms against the terror of death at the individual and cultural levels.”<sup>18</sup> They continue, “the problem with death denial is that no matter how hard we try to suppress and repress death awareness, anxiety about our own demise can still manifest

itself in a variety of symptoms, such as worries, depression, stresses, and conflicts.”<sup>19</sup>

Wong and Tomer then offer meaning management theory (MMT) as a contesting corollary to TMT. According to MMT, “the quest for meaning is a primary motive, because we are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures living in a world of meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, MMT is a personal orientation and life coping system structured toward growth, greater authenticity, and integration of own’s self and personal narrative. Interestingly, “when people are exposed to mortality salience, both TMT and MMT would predict an increase in pro-culture and pro-esteem activities, but for very different reasons. The former is for minimizing terror, but for the latter, it is for maximizing meaning, fulfillment, and joy.”<sup>21</sup>

## VI. DEATH MEDITATION AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

*To be obsessed with fear of death can prevent us from living fully and vitally because so much energy will be spent in the denial and avoidance of death. We keep on worrying about death to the extent that we are not free to live. We may avoid loving in order to avoid the pain of separation.*<sup>22</sup>

## SCIENTIFIC CONSIDERATIONS IN RELATION TO HUMAN FLOURISHING

Evolutionarily, death is a primal fear. If the primary motivation for life is procreation and the establishment of two generations after one’s self, it is natural to want to distance one’s self from one’s own death as much as possible. However, in an era with a much longer life expectancy in addition to much higher day to day safety, humans have developed many other goals than solely the continuation of the species.<sup>23</sup> The discussion of the work of Cozzolino et al. as well as Wong and Tomer demonstrates



this sentiment, as they find that the lack of death fear or death anxiety or else the presence of death acceptance, respectively, contribute to many aspects of human flourishing—specifically self-esteem, self-concept, general well-being, pro-social behavior, et cetera. However, there are many societal challenges present that complicate the way people view death. Specifically, though perhaps not obviously, it seems to be only our own death that we wish to avoid; images and stories of death and violence are in fact pervasive. Wong and Tomer write:

Death has invaded our living rooms in grisly detail. Our passive acceptance of the endless coverage of carnage and atrocity betrays a love-hate relationship with death: We are simultaneously repelled by its terror and seduced by its mysteries. The popular appeal of violent video games, TV dramas, and Hollywood movies provide further evidence of our morbid fascination with death.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the ways in which one can move into a state of human flourishing, an integration of own's whole life, have been established, as "one finds liberation by confronting death and encountering it as an existential reality."<sup>25</sup> Further, the outcome of the process of confrontation with one's death is people who are "primarily motivated by their desire to accomplish their life's mission, whatever the risks, because they have found something worth dying for. Death exposes the fragility of life and the futility of everyday busyness and strivings. Death focuses and clarifies. The terror of death teaches us what really matters and how to live authentically."<sup>26</sup> It teaches us how to fully live life alive. However, the question that remains yet in my mind is how this meditation and focus may inspire a more communal flourishing? How may we join our common humanness and sufferings to others, so that we may all flourish in solidarity with one another?

BUDDHIST THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RELATION TO HUMAN

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 FLOURISHING

Without question, the Buddhist understanding of the practice of *maranasati* contributes to human flourishing. As discussed previously, death meditation leads to growth or greater acceptance of three understandings essential to Buddhism: impermanence, suffering, and no-self. In addition, within much of the research I conducted, I found the idea of death meditation being beneficial in one's understanding and practice of non-attachment. Perreira writes that the "contemplation of death is not a strategy for renouncing the world but a possibility for arriving at a profound feeling of being more fully at home in the world."<sup>27</sup> The relinquishment of this fear allows us to feel at home in our humanness, in our current space, even though we know we will be occupant here only for a bounded time. Perreira describes that as being able to live "a life rendered fearless in the face of finitude."<sup>28</sup> Masel et al. concur, stating "Buddhist practice in the form of meditation can help to avoid suffering. It also may reinforce the recognition that human existence is painful."<sup>29</sup> She continues, "Buddhist philosophy might help one deal with the transience and finitude of the human body."<sup>30</sup> Most of all, Wong and Tomer eloquently describe the potential for human flourishing that arises from this practice as they quote Irv Yalom in *Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death*: "Yalom pointed out that 'some refuse the loan of life to avoid the debt of death' (p. 108). From an existential perspective, to live fully and happily, we need to engage what we fear most."<sup>31</sup>

## V. DEATH MEDITATION AND MINISTERIAL APPLICATION

*We need to learn how to talk about death in a way that is liberating, humanizing, and life-enhancing.*<sup>32</sup>

There are many applications for this type of understanding and practice. I could foresee a retreat designed around this topic (hopefully well-marketed) as a spiritual exercise in accepting and integrating all parts of your life yet to come. I believe that this would be helpful for those who work in the healthcare field, specifically for those in hospice or palliative care with a particularly high familiarity with death encounters. In Masel, Schur, and Watzke's "Life is Uncertain. Death is Certain. Buddhism and Palliative Care" piece, the authors describe ways in which patients can be coached into practices of non-attachment and focus on the present moment only (a shared value between palliative care and Buddhism). She shares a case study in which a Buddhist Master worked with a woman with metastatic breast cancer and significant breakthrough pain. He would say to her "If you experience pain, do not think about how strong it is or when it will pass. Think: 'This is pain!'"<sup>33</sup> Further Masel et al. discuss ways of implementing these types of values at the bedside:

On our rounds, we found that certain elements of Buddhism, without necessarily mentioning that they were Buddhist, could give comfort to our patients. Examples include the instruction to focus on the here and now, the knowledge of the impermanence of all things (as well as unpleasant symptoms), or being present with compassion.<sup>34</sup>

This all makes me reflect back on the experience I had as my grandfather grew ill and eventually passed away. I wonder how I could have been ministered to him in such a way that I could have avoided being so greatly confounded with grief. Certainly, some of it was due to my age. One could never expect a person of that age to have a fully integrated, holistic view of life and what it means to be alive, let alone a nourishing and sustaining vision of death and what it means to die. I had only fear: the fear of forever, the fear of finitude. Had I been present at my grandpa's side when a palliative

care nurse or chaplain was there, my hope would be that they would have started a conversation with him about what death and life, and what may be beyond, mean to him.

As I look ahead at my future ministry as a palliative care nurse, I would want to facilitate that conversation for and with the patient and family. I would want to let the person facing imminent death know they will not be alone, to let the family know that their loved one is not scared (assuming that is true, of course) and is comfortable. Given its correlation to emotional and spiritual wholeness, Masel et al. suggest that one of the best questions that can be asked in this situation is “Are you at peace?”<sup>35</sup> Looking back, I think I needed to hear my grandpa’s answer to this question. I needed to know that he would be ok, that I would (eventually) be ok without him. I needed comfort and reassurance. I needed my own peace.

In a case study about a Buddhist woman named Sarah with terminal cancer, Denise Barham writes:

Sarah viewed death as a normal process, a reality that she accepted would occur as long as she remained on this earthly existence...In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, I believe that the best ministerial application of this practice is in learning how to talk about death in a way that can bring important beliefs into the light, that can bring people together and out of the shadows of individualized grief.

After all, death is the one event truly inescapable in a human life. No amount of money or power can assuage the final reality of death. We can fear this certainty—our own limitedness—or we can choose to embrace our destiny and fully live in the present moment. It will not be easy work, but a renewed understanding of the fullness of life waits just beyond the horizon of our fear.

Buddhist practices of death meditation recognize the fundamental truth in the fact that the art of dying is the art of living.

### Notes

- 1 Todd LeRoy Perreira, “‘Die Before You Die’: Death Meditation as Spiritual Technology of the Self in Islam and Buddhism,” *The Muslim World* 100, no. 2 (April-July 2010): 247, accessed February 16, 2017, [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1478-1913](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1478-1913).
- 2 George D. Bond, “Theravada Buddhism’s Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death,” *History of Religions* 19, no. 3 (February 1980): 241, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/loi/hr>.
- 3 Perreira, 247.
- 4 Eva Masel, MD, Sophie Schur, MD, and Herbert Watzke, MD, “Life Is Uncertain. Death Is Certain. Buddhism and Palliative Care,” *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 44, no. 2 (August 2012): 308, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2012.02.018>.
- 5 Ibid., 308.
- 6 The other main type of death meditation that I came across in my research is *asubha bhāvanā*, which is the practice of meditating on the foulness of corpses. For the purposes of this paper, I could not go into further detail. However, I wanted to provide some cursory information about this practice. The practice of *asubha bhāvanā* involves a more direct rumination on the idea of death, as the practice involves observing abandoned and decaying corpses usually found in a cremation ground. Congruently with *maranasati*, this practice also brings an end to any closely held notions of self, as one recognizes that the fate that found this now dead person is a fate that waits for them as well. Their own embodiedness is transient and quickly passing away.
- 7 Bond, 243.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 243-244.

- 10 Ibid., 246.
- 11 Paul T.P. Wong and Adrian Tomer, “Beyond Terror and Denial: The Positive Psychology of Death Acceptance,” *Death Studies* 35, no. 2 (February 2011): 99, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/10.1080/07481187.2011.535377>.
- 12 I chose these areas to the exclusion of the scientific study of meditation writ large. Much of the research I have come across regarding studying meditation was looking at meditation more generally considered, without the specific intent toward meditating on one’s death. While there is a large amount of well-developed neurobiological studies assessing the effect of meditation on the brain, I deemed this too generic for my purposes. Thus, I tended toward the social sciences and psychological effect of the proposed outcomes of this particular form of meditation and its relevance on considerations of human wholeness.
- 13 Philip Cozzolino, Laura E.R. Blackie, and Lawrence S. Meyers, “Self-Related Consequences of Death Fear and Death Denial,” *Death Studies* 38, no. 6 (July 2014): 418, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/10.1080/07481187.2013.780110>.
- 14 Ibid., 419.
- 15 Ibid., 419-420.
- 16 Ibid., 421.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Wong and Tomer, 100.
- 19 Ibid., 100.
- 20 Ibid., 104.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Wong and Tomer, 100-101.
- 23 I should like to admit a certain death/lifestyle privilege from which I am approaching this topic. I believe that one’s own mortality is a topic that all people will face eventually assuming they live long enough lives and have the cognitive capacity to be able to engage with these ideas. However, the perspective of my own privilege, which I am wishing to name, is that the idea of

my own death is not something I naturally encounter on a daily basis. Barring unforeseen tragedy whether accidental or biological, my life expectancy, statistically, is quite high. For many people in the world today, life is survival; they must daily face the reality that tomorrow is not ensured—due to poverty, war, ecological degradation, et cetera. Thus, I would like to recognize that what they have no choice but to face each day, others are able to *choose* to engage with as a meditation practice, and I believe there is significant privilege in this.

24 Wong and Tomer, 100.

25 Bond 237.

26 Wong and Tomer, 103.

27 Perreira, 261.

28 Ibid.

29 Masel et al., 311.

30 Ibid.

31 Wong and Tomer, 101.

32 Ibid.

33 Masel et al., 310.

34 Ibid., 310.

35 Ibid.

36 Denise Barham, “The Last 48 Hours of Life: A Case Study of Symptom Control for a Patient Taking a Buddhist Approach to Dying,” *International Journal of Palliative Nursing* 9, no. 6 (June 2003): 249, accessed February 16, 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12968/ijpn.2003.9.6.11509>.